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ABSTRACT

To determine whether support systems ameliorated the impact of divorce on family stress and child adjustment, the present study examined the availability to divorced families of various support systems, including the extended family, church, work, and community groups. Specifically, the study addressed the impact of parental support systems on children's academic achievement and intellectual and social competence. Additionally, the study identified those specific support systems that were most highly related to diminished adverse consequences of divorce. Data gathered from an ongoing nationwide study begun at Kent State University in 1981 by the National Association of School Psychologists served as the basis for the analyses. Findings demonstrated the utility of at least three clusters of support variables: (1) availability of helpful relatives, including in-laws; (2) availability of friends and paid child care assistance, such as that provided by nursery schools and baby sitters; and (3) a positive relationship between child and noncustodial parent. Repeatedly, the custodial parent's activities in both occupational and educational endeavors also emerged as significantly related to child performance. Results confirmed that several support systems were related to the divorced mother's effectiveness in interacting with her children and illustrated the substantial effects of support systems on the child's school adjustment. (RH)

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Impact of Family Support Systems on Children's Academic and Social Functioning after Parental Divorce

John Guidubaldi and Helen Cleminshaw

The search for environmental factors that enhance children's adjustment to family disruption should logically begin with conditions that facilitate the single parent's ability to provide for children's needs. It has been suggested that single parents are more vulnerable to stressful life events and common everyday strain because they have fewer social resources available to assist them in coping with the impact of stress (Pearlin & Johnson, 1977; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Bilge and Kaufman (1983) discuss one-parent families and children of divorce from a cross-cultural perspective and conclude:

> In many societies, the conjugal bond can be broken with no adverse effects on the children, because there are strong personalized support systems. In our society, however, there are no adequate institutionalized support systems for children of one-parent families . . . It is not family form, but the support system and methods of socialization that have the greater impact on children . . . it is necessary that <u>all</u> who raise children in our society, regardless of family arrangement have adequate maternal resources and emotional support. (p. 69)

Longfellow (1979) concludes that the role of the social network in adjustment takes on greater significance in the divorcing family's situation because a real loss of contact with others occurs as a direct result of divorce. Following divorce, the single mother usually maintains or increases her frequency of contact with her own kin, but she significantly decreases her contact with her former husband's kin (Anspach, 1976; Spicer & Hampe, 1975; Marsden, 1969). In fact, 20% of the single sample studied by Marsden (1969) reported having no outside friends and a very limited social life.

Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1979) identify social support systems as a factor related to effective parenting in divorced families:

> Other support systems, such as parents, siblings, close friends (especially other divorced friends or intimate male friends), or a competent housekeeper, also were related to the mother's effectiveness in interacting with the child in divorced, but not intact, families. (p. 173)

However, the relationship of specific support systems to parent and child outcomes was not addressed, nor was the availability of these supports to families of divorce directly considered in earlier research.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the availability of various support systems including the extended family, church, work, and community groups to the divorced family in order to

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determine if support systems ameliorated the impact of divorce on family stress and child adjustment. Specifically, the study addresses the impact of parental support systems on children's academic achievement, intellectual and social competence. Additionally, the study identifies those specific support systems that are most highly related to diminished adverse consequences of divorce. Data gathered from the nationwide NASP-KSU study served as the basis for the following analyses.

Results

Tables 5 and 6 present the significant correlations of parent support variables with academic and social criteria as described in the nationwide study.

Academic Criteria

As evidenced in Table 5, support from certain relatives, particularly grandparents is related to the child's academic performance. For example, if the parent's father is living, the child has higher scores on WRAT Reading and Math subtests as well as higher math grades and IQ. Additionally, he is more likely to be in a regular class, and less likely to be in remedial reading services or to have repeated a school grade. If the child's custodial parent receives help in household tasks from his or her parents, the child performs better on WRAT Reading; and if child-care help is provided by these grandparents, the child is more likely to be in regular class placement. If the custodial parent's in-laws are available, the child receives better grades in reading and math; and if the child maintains contact with the noncustodial parent's relatives, he is more likely to have higher WRAT Reading and Spelling scores, higher IQ scores, higher math grades and higher teacher's rating of overall academic competence.

More frequent contact between the child and his noncustodial parent is related to higher IQ scores, and when this parent-child relationship is positive, the child performs better on the IQ test, WRAT Reading and Spelling subtests, grade in reading, and teacher rating of overall academic achievement. If the custodial parent receives help with household tasks from the ex-spouse, the child is less likely to have repeated a school grade.

When friends provide help in child care, there is a positive relationship to IQ scores, as well as to WRAT Reading and Math scores. There is also less likelihood of remedial reading class placement.

Involvement in both social/recreational and professional groups by the parent is related to the child's higher IQ and WRAT Reading scores. Social/recreational group involvement is also related to less likelihood of remedial reading class placement and repeating a school grade.

Employment of the custodial parent was related to several criteria, including WRAT Reading and Spelling, grade in reading, IQ scores, and teacher's rating of overall academic achievement. A

clearly prominent support factor relating to several academic criteria was the child's previous attendance in nursery school or day care. This parent support variable related to all WRAT subatests, IQ scores, grade in math, and less likelihood of repeating a school grade.

Social Criteria

Table 6 presents the major findings from the Vineland Teacher Questionnaire. As expected, Communication, Daily Living, and Social subscales were more strongly related to support variables than the Motor subscale. The quality of the child's relationship with the noncustodial parent again proved to be an important factor. When the child's contact was positive, the child had higher scores on both the Daily Living and Social scales. The child's continuing contact with the noncustodial parent's relatives was also related positively to the Vineland Communication, Daily Living, and Social scales. Also consistent with previously stated results, the custodial parent's father appeared to be a major resource. If the father were living, the grandchild scored higher on Communication, and if he lived close by, was available and seen as helpful to the parent, the child scored higher on the Social scale.

Receiving help with child care also was related positively to the child's performance on the Vineland scales. For example, child care help from friends, neighbors and hired sitters was related to higher Communication scores. Helpful female friends were related to higher Daily Living and Social scores, and dating one person regularly also related to better Daily Living scores. Thus, assistance from either family, friends or paid help was positively related to the child's performance.

The parent's participation in community groups, whether religious, social, recreational, educational or occupational also contributed to higher Vineland scores. Religious group activity was related to higher Social scores, while social/recreational activity was related to Daily Living scores, school attendance was related to both Communication and Social scores, and employment was associated with higher Communication scores.

Once again, support during the preschool-age period by nursery schools and day care failities was related to later performance. If the child were enrolled in a preschool, better scores were noted on both Communication and Daily Living scales.

Using the Hahnemann Elementary School Behavior Rating Scale as a criterion measure, several parent support variables were found to be related to specific classroom behaviors of children from divorced families. Significant correlations ranged from .11 to .23.

The importance of quality contact between the noncustodial parent and the child was again demonstrated by several significant correlations with criteria. More positive contacts significantly related to 8 of 15 HESB ratings, including higher originality, independent learning, and involvement; and less intellectual dependency, irrelevant talk, social overinvolvement, withdrawn

behavior, and inattention.

The importance of the noncustodial parent's relatives was further illustrated by relationships with several classroom behavior outcomes. The influence of these relatives as support persons for the custodial parent is consistently evident. For example, having in-laws living near the custodial parent was positively related to productivity with peers, less intellectual dependency, less social overinvolvement, and less withdrawn behavior. If the in-laws were available to the parent, less social overinvolvement was observed as well as less withdrawn behavior. When the in-laws were perceived as helpful, more independent learning, and less unreflectiveness and withdrawal were found in divorced-family children.

The most powerful series of relationships found in regard to in-laws pertained to the amount of contact the child had with the noncustodial parent's relatives. More contact was related to 11 of 15 HESB ratings, including originality, independent learning, less intellectual dependency, less failure anxiety, less unreflectiveness, less irrelevant talk, less social overinvolvement, less withdrawn behavior, less critical competitiveness, less blaming and less inattention.

Nursery school or day care enrollment of the child during preschool years was related to higher originality, higher independent learning, more productivity with peers and less intellectual dependency. These findings reinforce the consistent relationships found between previous preschool program attendance and academic success.

Two additional variables, parent attending school and being employed, were shown to be related to classroom behaviors. School attendance was related to independent learning and productivity with peers. It was also related to less intellectual dependency, failure anxiety, unreflectiveness, and irrelevant talk. There was a positive relationship between parent employment and originality and independent learning. Helpfulness of fellow employees was related to more originality and independent learning and to less intellectual dependency, less unreflectiveness, and less inattention.

Analyses of parent support variables with other social criteria add further emphasis to the importance of the noncustodial parent and his or her relatives, the custodial parent's father, female friends, community groups, nursery school or day care service, and parent's school attendance. For example, frequency of contact between the child and the noncustodial parent is related to the teacher's rating of peer acceptance (PAR). Moreover, the quality of the child's relationship with this parent is related to more peer acceptance as determined by both teacher and custodial parent ratings, and it further relates to higher teacher assigned conduct grades. The child's contact with the noncustodial parent's relatives is also related to peer popularity as rated by both teachers and custodial parents.

Discussion

In contrast to previous studies, this research examined the impact of parental support systems on child outcome variables. While it is certainly important to examine mediating variables such as the impact of support systems on parent behaviors and improved home conditions, it is at least equally important to know which support variables are ultimately related to the child's social and academic performance.

Considering the size of the sample involved in this study, some correlations were significant even though quite small and accounting for only a trivial amount of variance. However, the large number of relationships observed and the consistency of direction are impressive findings that reinforce the importance of the parent support variables described herein.

This study has demonstrated the utility of at least three clusters of support variables: availability of helpful relatives including in-laws, availability of friends and paid child care assistance such as nursery schools and babysitters, and a positive relationship between the child and the noncustodial parent.

Repeatedly, the custodial parent's activities in both occupational and educational endeavors also emerged as significantly related to child performance. Whether these crisis-meeting activities exert their effects through improved parent self confidence and improved family income, or through more direct effects such as modeling influence remains to be determined through more elaborate analyses.

Clearly, the results of this study confirm the conclusions of some previous researchers, such as Hetherington et al.'s (1979) assertion that several support systems were related to the divorced mother's effectiveness in interacting with her children. More importantly, it illustrates the substantial effects of support systems on the child's school adjustment.

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Table 5

Parent Support Variables Related to Academic Criteria for Divorced Sample

Predictor Variable	WRAT Reading	WRAT Spelling	WRAT Math	IQ	Grade in Reading	Grade in Math	Reg. Class	Repeat. Grade	Remed. Read. Class	Teacher Ratg. of Achieve.
Parent's mother is living							r=.13*	r=-.12*		
Parent's mother is available				r=-.16*					r=.16*	
Parent's mother is helpful									r=.15*	
Parent's father is living	r=.11*		r=.15*	r=.11*		r=.14*	r=.13*	r=-.18**	r=-.11*	
Parent's father is helpful							r=.21**			
Number of parent's brothers				r=-.12*						r=-.14*
Number of parent's sisters									r=.16**	
In-laws available to parent					r=.19*	r=.17*				
Child maintains contact with ex-spouse's relatives	r=.11*	r=.12*		r=.15**		r=.16*				r=.23***
How often does child see other parent?				r=.12*						
Child has positive relationship with other parent since divorce	r=.15*	r=.16**		r=.12*	r=.17*					r=.15**
Parent receives help with child care from parents							r=.15*			
Parent receives help with child care from relatives									r=-.11*	
Parent receives help with child care from friends	r=.17**		r=.14*	r=.14*					r=-.17**	

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Predictor Variable	WRAT Reading	WRAT Spelling	WRAT Math	IQ	Grade in Reading	Grade in Math	Reg. Class	Repeat. Grade	Remed. Read. Class	Teacher Ratg. of Achieve.
Parent receives help with child care from neighbors									r=-.13*	
Child was enrolled in day care/nursery school	r=.18**	r=.15*	r=.12*	r=.23***		r=.16*		r=-.14*		
Parent receives help from ex-spouse in household tasks								r=-.12*		
Parent receives help with household tasks from neighbors					r=-.16*					
Parent receives help with household tasks from parents	r=.13*									
Parent receives help with household tasks from hired help				r=.13*						
Parent participates in church/ religious groups							r=.11*			
Parent belongs to social/ recreational groups	r=.12*			r=.20***				r=.12*	r=-.14*	
Parent belongs to profes-sional groups	r=.12*			r=.15**						
Parent attends school									r=-.16**	
Parent is employed	r=.14*	r=.12*		r=.26***	r=.21**					r=.13*
Helpfulness of fellow employees										r=.13*

*p < .05
**p < .01
***p < .001

Table 6

Parent Support Variables Related to Higher Vineland Scale Scores for Children of Divorce

Variable	Communi-cation	Daily Living	Social	Motor
Parent's father is living	r=.13*			
Parent's father lives close			r=.18*	
Parent's father is available			r=.18*	
Parent's father is helpful			r=.15*	
Other relatives available			r=.13*	
Female friends are very helpful		r=.14*	r=.19**	
Friends give child care help	r=.18**			
Neighbors give child care help	r=.13*			
Hired sitter gives child care help	r=.15*			r=.15*
Hired help gives household assistance			r=.14*	
Parent belongs to religious group			r=.12*	
Parent belongs to social/recreational group		r=.14*		
Parent attends school	r=.15**		r=.15*	
Parent is employed	r=.12*			
Child was enrolled in preschool	r=.17**	r=.14*		
Child's relationship with other parent since divorce		r=.14*	r=.15*	
Child's contact with ex-spouse's relatives	r=.15*	r=.17**	r=.16**	
Parent dating one person regularly		r=.15*		

*p < .05
**p < .01
***p < .001